

# "LIFE IS MORE JOYOUS"



By  
**BRIAN BUNTING**

REPORT OF A VISIT TO THE SOVIET UNION

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COVER: 20-year-old Tamara Lukyanova, a member of the Moscow State Dance Company, performs one of the folk dances of the Soviet Union. As the music gets faster and faster Tamara gathers more and more momentum, until she becomes a multi-coloured "human top" caught up in the excitement of the fast and furious dance.

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# "LIFE IS MORE JOYOUS"



Brian and Sonia Bunting photographed on the bank of the Moscow River, with the Kremlin buildings in the background.

**WE** were invited to visit the Soviet Union by VOKS, the organisation for cultural relations with foreign countries. VOKS provided us with transportation to, in and from the Soviet Union, with accommodation in Moscow and Kiev, the two cities we visited, and with all the facilities which were required to make our trip comfortable, comprehensive and memorable.

We flew to Moscow from Prague, in Czechoslovakia, a country about which I hope to tell you later. Our plane was a two-engined Soviet machine, solidly built and very steady in flight. For most of the journey we flew over cloud and could see nothing of the ground beneath. As we approached Moscow, how-

ever, the clouds parted, and for the last hour of the journey we had a clear view of the surrounding countryside.

It was still winter, and the ground was covered with deep snow. The rivers were frozen, and the only break in the vast expanse of white which stretched to the horizon on every side was the dark green of the forests. In the villages over which we passed there were few signs of life. The roads seemed impassable and the population still hibernating.

The aerodrome on which we landed near Moscow was also for the most part covered with snow, only the runways being cleared. As we stepped out of the plane we were greeted by an icy wind, which chilled us to the bone.

Welcoming us at the airport was Grigori Chesnikov, the VOKS official, who accompanied

us throughout our tour of the Soviet Union. South Africans may remember him—he was on the staff of the Soviet Consulate in Pretoria and Cape Town between 1942 and 1946. He was the soul of hospitality, good humour and reliable information, and contributed in no small measure to our enjoyment of our stay. With him was Helen, another VOKS official, who presented Sonia with a bouquet of flowers.

### **On We Go**

For the next two weeks in the Soviet Union we were on the go day and night. We were out of our hotel generally by 9 in the morning, and seldom got to bed before midnight. We visited factories, creches, museums, art galleries, the Kremlin, the opera, theatre and ballet, shops, homes, a collective farm, the new Moscow University, a polyclinic—we saw as much as was physically possible in the time at our disposal.

The choice of what we wanted to see rested with us. We had a conference with VOKS officials as soon as we arrived. They asked us what we wanted to see, and we replied: "We want to see how the Soviet people work, how they live and how they enjoy themselves." And we did.

### **On Our Own**

Nor was there any question of our being taken on a conducted tour only to the show places, or of our being constantly dogged by VOKS officials and security guards. It is true that for the most part Grigori did the rounds with us, but that was necessary because neither of us knew the language. But Grigori knew when to leave us on our own, and on more than one occasion we wandered about the streets of Moscow and Kiev quite on our own, window-shopping, just looking, quite free of any restrictions.

Can we describe to you how we felt when we first stood in the centre of Moscow just outside the Kremlin walls, and looked about us?

First of all, the impression that is created in the capitalist Press about the mere appearance of Moscow proved to be completely false. How many times have we read in the Rand Daily Times or the Cape Mail or the Citizen that the streets of Moscow are wide but deserted, that the people shuffle about in a dispirited fashion, that there is no life, no enthusiasm in the capital city of the Soviet Union? How many times have we seen pictures of the Red Square, a great, empty expanse of stone, with perhaps one ancient motor car making its solitary way across the scene?

### **Surprised Even Us**

We were, of course, not victims of capitalist propaganda before we arrived in the Soviet Union. But in any event the purely superficial appearance of the Moscow centre took even us by surprise. The streets were packed with vehicular traffic at practically all hours of the day and night.

Down Gorky Street, the main thoroughfare of Moscow, there flows uninterruptedly a stream of motor cars, interspersed with lorries, trackless trams and buses. At the main intersections traffic is so heavy that there is no turning across the stream of traffic into side streets for fear of traffic jams. The sidewalks are black with people, not shuffling miserably to their doom, but going briskly about their business. Just looking at the Muscovites walking through the streets we had the impression they are an alert, lively, confident people who know what they are after. And let nobody tell us that you never see a smile on the face of a Soviet citizen!

Soviet cars look like any other cars, perhaps more after the American style than the British. Their performance is good, as we can testify from personal experience, and they are very comfortable. They come in all sizes, from the very large to the 10 horsepower types. Probably most of the cars we saw in Moscow were

official cars, that is, cars which belong to an organisation — a trade union, a factory, etc.—and not to the individual who was being conveyed in it. But the number of privately-owned cars is increasing steadily.

Perhaps there is too much hooting by motorists in Moscow. The streets are very wide in the centre, and there are always crowds of people making their way across, as often as not against the traffic lights. Moscow drivers, who have to keep moving when the lights are with them, rely on their hooters to clear a way through the throng. Our hotel, the National, was situated near the main intersection in Gorky Street. If it had not been winter, so that the double windows in all the rooms were closed to shut out the cold, we would probably not have slept easily through the noise.

### Special Machinery

Snow is quite a problem in Moscow. When it comes down it stays and freezes hard until the spring, when it thaws, melts and makes a mess in the streets. If it is left against the walls of buildings there is a tendency for plaster and brickwork to be damaged. If it is left on the roofs they, too, can be ruined. We saw special machinery at work in the streets for scooping up the snow and moving it by conveyor belt into lorries, which then cart it away. From our hotel window we could

see men on the roof of the Kremlin pushing the snow off on to the ground below. Moscow streets, apart from piles of snow which still remained here and there, were clean and tidy. The job of keeping them so is undertaken mainly by women.

How are the people dressed? Partly for reasons of climate, the Muscovites in winter present quite a different appearance from, say, a South African street crowd. A pre-requisite to keep out the cold is a heavy greatcoat, preferably fur-lined, plus a fur cap which in the worst weather buttons down over the ears. Most men and many of the women wore leather top boots; ordinary shoes would be useless in slush and snow. Indoors, since most buildings are centrally heated and kept to a regulated temperature, one can dress quite normally; in fact, specially warm clothes, such as woollen shirts and long underpants, can be an embarrassment.

The vast bulk of the people we saw in Moscow were well and comfortably dressed. Once or twice we saw people who could be described as shabbily dressed, but they were so much the exception that they attracted our attention. For the most part the outward physical appearance of the people impressed us most favourably.

The quality of Soviet textiles is good, and is improving steadily as new technical processes are discovered and introduced into the factories.

## WE VISIT A TEXTILE FACTORY

WE were taken over the Petra Alexiev textile factory in Moscow, and were able to examine the various types of cloth produced there. This is not one of the newest factories in Moscow; in fact, it is one of the oldest, being more than 100 years old. Before the 1917 revolution it belonged to an Englishman. Many of the machines in use in this factory are old British and German types, only now being replaced by the latest Soviet-made machines.

The factory makes some materials out of pure wool, some out of mixtures of wool and artificial silk, some of artificial silk only and some out of cotton. The pure wool is, of course, the best and most expensive cloth produced by the factory. Both Australian and South African wools were used by the factory, in addition to Soviet wool.

We asked why it was necessary for the Soviet Union to import wool, and were told it was due

to the greatly increased consumption of woollen goods by the Soviet people, as a result of which the Soviet Government had decided that production must be increased. Now that the Soviet people had more money to spend they were demanding more and more materials made of pure wool instead of synthetic fibres. Production in this factory is today four times as great as it was before 1917.

## Self-criticism

Not all Soviet textile production is of the same quality, naturally; some cloths are better than others. A visit to the Moscow circus revealed to us that there were serious complaints about the quality of cloth produced by at least some factories.

A clown came on to the arena dressed in a huge garment several sizes too large for him, with sleeves at least a foot too long and trouser legs flopping on the ground. His fellow-clown looked at him in amazement and asked:

"But why are you wearing a suit like that?"

Clown No. 1 answers: "Don't worry, chum. It will fit perfectly after it's been washed."

Clown No. 2 replies: "But how is it possible that a factory can produce cloth like that to-day?"

After some further talk they discover that the "manager of the textile factory" is sitting in the audience, and call him down on to the arena.

The clowns tackle him: "How dare you make cloth that is not pre-shrunk?"

The manager is most indignant. "What do you mean? All the cloth made in my factory is good. Why, the very suit I'm wearing now is made from my own cloth, and a very fine suit it is, too!"

At that the two clowns drag in an enormous washing machine, consisting of a large barrel with a crank handle in the middle. Without any ceremony they grab hold of the factory manager, open the lid, thrust him inside and

clamp the lid down again. Then one of them turns the crank handle furiously.

After a few moments the lid is lifted off again, and out jumps a little boy, dressed exactly as the factory manager. Not only the cloth but the man himself had shrunk!

This turn brought the house down.

It illustrated, incidentally, not only one way in which freedom of criticism is exercised in the Soviet Union, but also the feeling of responsibility amongst the public for what is produced by Soviet industry.

## Equal Pay

The Petra Alexiev factory employs 3,000 workers, 80 per cent. of whom are women, who here, as everywhere in the Soviet Union, get the same rate of pay as men for the same job. They mainly live in houses or flats built for them by the factory, although there is no tied housing, and a worker who leaves the factory is not obliged to give up his home. Rents in the Soviet Union constitute from 3 to 5 per cent. of wages, and the rent of a flat will vary according to the income of the tenant.

The factory runs a creche for the small children of the workers, two kindergartens for the older children, an old-age home for retired workers, all of which we inspected. For the cultural life of the workers there is a club, with a main hall seating 500 people, where either a cinema show or a theatrical production is staged every night. The workers themselves engage in all sorts of cultural activities, and the club boasts two orchestras and a choir, a library with 20,000 books, a drama circle. Sports facilities are also provided by the factory.

We were informed that similar facilities are provided, in greater or lesser degree, at all factories in the Soviet Union. We stress again—this is one of the oldest factories in Moscow and not one of the latest show places.

## Misunderstanding

A rather amusing incident occurred as we left the block of flats in which the old-age home was situated. (The old people, incidentally, had been very pleased to see us, and told us they lacked nothing.)

Just over the road was a row of tin shanties—ramshackle structures with tiny windows—which contrasted strangely with the building we had just left.

We felt a little embarrassed about these shanties, but felt we had to have an explanation for them, and asked the factory official how it was possible for people to live in places like that. He roared with laughter.

"The flat-dwellers keep their pigs and chickens in those places," he explained. "We don't like the look of them any more than you do, and as soon as we can we will clear them away and provide proper structures."

A tremendous amount of building work is going on all over Moscow. There is still a shortage of accommodation, as the population has increased faster than homes could be built for them. But we sensed that the people of Moscow now feel that they are at last getting on top of the housing problem, which at the present rate of building should be ended within the next five years.

Everywhere in Moscow are to be seen great blocks of flats under construction, topped by the tall cranes which the Soviet builders use to move and lift materials, pre-fabricated sections, etc. Some of the new blocks of flats are skyscrapers of 26 storeys. Week by week families are being moved out of their old quarters into bright new flats.

## THE NEW MOSCOW UNIVERSITY

**A**N example of the new building, is Moscow University, built on the Lenin Hills south of the city. We spent four hours or so inspecting this structure, which is so colossal that we could see only a small portion of it in the

Moscow presents a unique appearance to the foreign visitor. Side by side with the new, modern structures which are going up can still be seen the houses of old Russia, squat, dilapidated structures, some of wood, some of brick, some of lath and plaster, many of them built out of plumb and leaning at crazy angles over the streets. The Soviet people call them "wild houses," and have pledged to demolish them all under the plan for the reconstruction of Moscow, which was drawn up in the '30s.

## New Homes

As the new blocks of flats are completed families in a certain area are moved out of their "wild houses" into the new homes. Whole blocks of the "wild houses" are then demolished in preparation for the erection of still more flats. This process of reconstruction in Moscow is going on at such a pace that year by year the appearance of the city changes, and we feel confident that, if we were to visit the Soviet Union again in, say, five years' time, we would not recognise the place.

The new Moscow which is appearing in the process is a city of wide streets and pleasant prospects, tree-lined avenues and beautiful parks. We have heard some Western architects say they do not care for modern Soviet architecture, which they describe as "old-fashioned" or "semi-Victorian." All we can say, not being experts in either architecture or building, is that the new buildings harmonise with the old and derive many of their motifs from, for instance, the towers of the Kremlin and the cupolas of St. Basil's Cathedral on Red Square.

time at our disposal. It is an immense conception by any standards.

The old Moscow University was situated in the centre of the city. When, after World War II, the number of students increased



The main block of the new Moscow University.

rapidly to something near the 18,000 mark the old buildings proved inadequate for their task, and work on the new university was started in 1949. The main block, which is 32 storeys high, was completed in 1953.

The university is by no means completed yet. So far 37 of the new blocks have been constructed. When the plan is fulfilled there will be 100 blocks altogether. Only the science faculties have so far been transferred to the new building, and studies in the humanities, arts, etc., continue at the old buildings in the centre of the city.

To illustrate the size of the new university, we were told that if a baby were born in one room and spent one day of its life in each room it would be 60 years old before it was able to leave.

Moscow students spend a minimum of five years at the university. "Permanent" students, of the

type we know so well in South Africa, are not tolerated in the Soviet universities.

We were taken over laboratories, lecture rooms, theatres, museums, refectories, etc. We could judge that the equipment is of the best and that there is plenty of it. Next year a hospital, creche and nursery school will be among the new university buildings to be erected.

Living accommodation is available in the university for 6,000 students. Each boarder is provided with a separate room, plus furniture, radio, etc. Two of these rooms share a bathroom and lavatory, so that if two students marry they can enjoy the complete privacy of a self-contained flat. Kitchens are provided where students can cook their own meals; if they prefer it, they can dine at one of the many restaurants in the university. There is a full



range of cultural and sporting facilities.

Accommodation costs each boarder 15 roubles a month. Each student is paid between 300 and 500 roubles a month, and tuition costs only 400 roubles a year, so it will be seen nobody is prevented by poverty from undertaking higher studies in the Soviet Union.

## Reconstruction

Perhaps the most impressive achievements in Soviet building since the war, however, have been in the reconstruction of the war-damaged cities. The rebirth of Stalingrad is, of course, known to all. We were able to see for ourselves what had been achieved in Kiev.

Kiev, a beautiful city of two million inhabitants on the elbow of the River Dnieper, was under Nazi occupation for 25 months. When the Soviet forces re-entered the city they found that 50 per cent. of the housing accommodation had been completely destroyed and much of the remainder was badly damaged. We were taken on a tour of Kiev, but, apart from one building which was a blackened shell, we were able to find no other trace of war damage. Everything had been restored.

Here, as in Moscow, buildings under construction were to be seen in all parts of the city. There is a lot still to be done. The "wild houses" here, as in Moscow, still exist; and in Kiev, too, the problem of replacing them with fine modern structures is being undertaken with striking energy.

## Progress in Industry

While in Kiev we were taken over the Gorky Automatic Machine Plant, which turns out machines and machine-tools. Built in 1937-38, it now employs 3,000 workers, 30 per cent. of whom are women, including many of the most highly-skilled workers. When the factory first opened most of its equipment came from abroad. To-day the factory can produce itself any of the machines with which it was first equipped. We were shown, for instance, one machine which, up to the time of

the war, could only be obtained from America. To-day this factory manufactures such machines. It is clear that as far as industrial technique and production are concerned the Soviet Union is to-day self-sufficient and independent.

Not that the Soviet Union wishes to isolate itself from the West. On the contrary, Soviet leaders are constantly stressing the need for increased trade between East and West, and while we were in Moscow our hotel was packed with British businessmen out to collect some of the £400,000,000 in trade contracts offered by the Soviet Government.

While we were inspecting the Gorky plant we were invited by the foreman of one of the sections, a Mr. Dubinsky, to visit his home. He lives in one of the first blocks of flats to be completed in Kiev after the war. With his wife and two children he occupies a two-roomed flat, sharing a bathroom and kitchen with another flat. Just after the war, when it was urgent to get a roof over people's heads, buildings had been constructed in this way to save time and materials.

Mr. Dubinsky told us quite frankly that before the war his accommodation had been better—he had had a three-roomed flat with his own bathroom and kitchen. In fact, he said, he was now building his life for the second time, as his first effort had been completely destroyed by the Nazis.

The factory workers and many of their machines had been evacuated before the Nazi occupation of Kiev. Although the plant itself was damaged, some of the workers were back on the second day after liberation, and by 1950 production was higher than it had been at the outbreak of the war. For Mr. Dubinsky and thousands of others, however, life had to start again after the war.

## Confident

Mr. Dubinsky is not an unhappy man. By no means. He was bubbling over with confidence and goodwill.

"I have everything I want," he said, pointing with a sweep of his hand round his living-room. "I have television and radio. I have a camera" (and we duly looked over his massive photograph album, with pictures of himself and his family on holiday, etc.). "I am starting to keep tropical fish.

"But, above all, I have complete confidence in my future. I know I will never be out of work,

that if I am sick or too old to work I will be cared for. I know that my sons can go as far in life as they are capable of going.

"I'm not worried," he said. "Things are getting better for us all the time."

In conclusion he said:

**"Tell your people that we in the Soviet Union have suffered greatly in the war. Now all we want is peace so that we can build our lives the way we want to."**

## A COLLECTIVE FARM

**T**HE same peace message was conveyed to us by workers on the collective farm "The First of May," about 30 miles from Kiev. The Nazis had been in occupation in that area, too, for just over two years, and when they left the collective farm was destroyed. The Nazis took off with them every head of cattle and did not leave so much as a chicken. Buildings were ransacked.

By hard and painful labour the farm has been restored and is once again in flourishing shape. New animals, machines and other assistance had been generously supplied by the authorities.

"The First of May" collective comprises 680 families, with a total of 1,070 workers. The farm is 3,114 hectares in size, including 2,241 hectares of ploughing land. Grain and vegetable production and animal husbandry are the main branches of farming practised.

It was still winter and, although the ground was clear of snow here, sowing had not yet begun. There was thus not much activity on the farm, but we were taken the rounds and shown everything there was to see.

The animals were in tip-top condition, and were housed in sheds which were kept immaculately clean and tidy. We remarked to one another that we had never before seen clean pigs or clean pig-pens, and if this farm is in any way typical one would imagine the association of pigs

with dirt and squalor no longer applies in the Soviet Union.

### Mechanised

We were also shown some of the machinery used on the farm—giant harvester combines, automatic potato sowers and reapers, ploughs and tractors and so on. As far as farming could be mechanised it was mechanised on this farm. Many of the machines—for milking, for instance—were operated by electricity. Incidentally, every house had electric light.

The farm runs its own saw-mill, a plant for treating flax, a machine repair shop, and has its own granary and mill for the cereals. The agronomists on the station have charge of two large hot-houses, in which young plants are nurtured and experimental work in plant breeding is carried on. Experiments in animal breeding are also conducted on the farm.

What struck us more than anything about this collective farm was that none of the amenities of big city life are missing. There are two schools, one with 350 children and 20 teachers, capable of supplying the full 10 years of compulsory education demanded by the State. There is a maternity home and a medical station staffed with doctors and nurses. The farm has its own radio centre, and in addition every house has its own radio set.

The farm workers run their own club, where film shows are presented twice weekly and theatri-

cal shows produced. The collective even has an orchestra and a choir, and in addition the Kiev orchestra, opera and theatrical groups come out frequently to give performances on collective farms in the region. There is a library on the farm and two shops run by a co-operative.

**There is even a school of music—in the heart of the countryside! And this, perhaps more than anything else, demonstrated to us the progress that has been made in carrying out the directive of the Soviet Government that the distinction between town and country must be eliminated.**

When we visited the school we could hear the sad tones of a 'cello coming from one of the rooms, and there was a young girl struggling through her first piece. The music school has 41 pupils and nine teachers, and instruction is provided on a wide range of instruments, including the piano, string and wind instruments and a variety of local folk instruments. If the pupils make good progress they may continue their studies at the Kiev Musical Academy, and many have done so.

We went into the homes of some of the farm workers. You will still find in these solid, recently built houses the great ovens, famous in Russian literature, which the people used to use for cooking purposes in the daytime and for sleeping on during the cold winter nights. To-day, however, the workers have comfortable beds to sleep in, though we can well imagine some of the older folk still creep on top of the oven when there is a hard frost on the ground.

## **A Retired Couple**

In one of the houses we came across an old couple who had retired from active work on the farm and were now only working their own small plot of ground. All collective farmers have a house with a small plot of ground for their own use. The old woman had not been expecting us, for she was rather disturbed about her appearance when we

walked through the front door, but when she heard we were visitors from South Africa she livened up immediately and started talking about her life. The old man meanwhile hauled out one of the local musical instruments, something like a balalaika, and insisted on demonstrating to us that he had lost nothing of his old talent.

"I was beaten by the landlord and his officials under the old regime," the old woman said. "Life was very hard then, and there was no hope for anybody. But to-day life is good and we have no complaints. My daughter is a doctor and my son is studying to become an engineer. That could never have happened to us before."

Incidentally, 2 per cent. of the collective farm's annual income is set aside to provide for the needs of its aged and infirm members.

**You may have noticed I have avoided using the word "peasants" in talking of these collective farm workers, for they are no longer peasants, no longer the brutish, ignorant, poverty-stricken muzhiks of Tsarist Russia. Here on these collective farms is being produced a new type of countryman, who has already contributed a great deal to the culture and scientific knowledge of his own country and the world as a whole.**

The farm is run by the farm workers themselves, and the annual general meeting of all the members of the collective, which decides policy and elects the farm committee, is the highest authority in the economic sphere. In the political sphere affairs are controlled by the village Soviet, on which every 100 people are represented by one elected member.

When we had done the rounds of the farm the chairman of the farm committee, Mr. Solidovnikov, led us back to his office.

"Well," he said, "now you have seen a collective farm. Tell me, what do the newspapers in your country say about our collectives?"

We told him that reports varied but that we had seen statements about organised terror and slave

labour on the Soviet farms. He just laughed.

For the record, we may end this brief account of a Soviet collective farm with the statement that there are 28,000 such collective farms in the Ukraine alone. Also, in the region in which the "May the First" collective is situ-

ated, there are still two farmers who have refused to join a collective and are farming on their own. They are at liberty to do so provided they do not employ any labour to help them, for in the Soviet Union the law lays down that no man may profit from the labour of another.

## ART FOR THE PEOPLE

**W**HILE in the Soviet Union we did our best to acquaint ourselves with the cultural life of the people, and in both Moscow and Kiev we went to the opera and ballet, concerts, art galleries, museums, libraries. We cut out straight theatre and the cinema because of the language difficulty and the lack of time at our disposal.

First let us, in our humble way, confirm what is the judgment of the international experts—that the Moscow ballet is the best in the world. Between us we have seen quite a bit of ballet in other countries, and while we were in Moscow we spoke to many foreigners who had seen a great deal more, and all agreed they had seen nothing approaching the Moscow standard.

At the famous Bolshoi Theatre we saw two ballets by Prokofiev, "Cinderella" and the "Stone Flower," and Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake," so we had a mixture of the classical and the modern to judge by. If "Swan Lake" was more popular with the audiences we found it, good though it was, not so well danced as the Prokofiev ballets, in which, in our opinion, the better dancers appeared.

### Ulanova

Prima ballerina in "Stone Flower," the ballet Prokofiev completed only a few hours before his death, was the peerless Ulanova. It is difficult to speak of her artistry. Her technique is so perfect that everything she attempts appears essentially simple. Her grace and poise spring, of course, from her painstaking attention to the smallest detail of

her art and her mastery, after long years of study and practice, of the most intricate movements. She was simply superb. She is no longer a young woman but she is young at heart, and her performance radiated the freshness and enthusiasm of a young girl.

She was supported in "Stone Flower" by a group of solo dancers who were very nearly up to her standard, and by a corps de ballet, every member of which seemed capable of taking a leading part at short notice if necessary. It is considered a privilege to dance on the stage of the Bolshoi, and only the best dancers of the Moscow school can make the grade. The general standard of performance is consequently very high.

Add to the wonderful dancing a decor of staggering design and ingenuity, brilliant lighting and a perfectly trained orchestra, and you have a final product which is simply overwhelming in its effect on the audience. The stars were dragged back for curtain call after curtain call, and from the serried tiers of the Bolshoi audience the name of Ulanova was shouted over and over again with admiration and enthusiasm.

In Moscow we also saw Tchaikovsky's opera "The Queen of Spades," and in Kiev an opera, "Bogdan Gmielnitzky," the hero of the events, specially composed to commemorate the tercentenary of the unification of Russia and the Ukraine, which is being celebrated this year. If anything, we were more impressed by the singing in Kiev, two of the stars in particular being as good as anybody we have heard anywhere.



Soviet ballerina Ulanova, partnered by Zhdanov, in the Prokofiev ballet, "Romeo and Juliet."

We visited, also in Moscow, Abrasov's puppet theatre, which last year created a sensation in Britain, and saw a performance of a Czech fairy tale, which was so good and so cleverly produced technically that we forgot we were looking at puppets. It was a very witty play and the audience was kept in fits of laughter.

## International Woman's Day

Finally, on March 8, International Woman's Day, we had the privilege of attending a special celebration at the Bolshoi Theatre. It started at 7 in the evening with speeches by Soviet

women's leaders. At about 8.15 a concert began and continued until 12.30. The first half of the programme consisted of performances by young Pioneers. Little boys and girls (the eldest were about 14) came on to the stage and played the violin or the piano or danced some ballet, and again we were simply amazed at their standard of performance. Here were youngsters already as proficient and accomplished as professionals, guaranteeing a bright future for the arts in the Soviet Union.

The second half of the programme was a cross-section of practically every form of art practised in the Soviet Union. We were entertained by professionals this time—opera singers, ballet and folk dancers, musicians, gymnasts, choirs, concluding with a terrific performance by the Red Army Choir.

There are nearly 50 theatres in Moscow alone—opera and ballet theatres, children's theatres, puppet theatres, theatres for straight plays, in addition to concert halls and cinemas. All are jammed to the doors. We never saw an empty seat at any of the performances we went to, and generally on approaching, say, the Bolshoi we were waylaid by enthusiasts hoping for the off-chance of a cancellation. Prices generally are very reasonable, and nobody could complain that he couldn't afford to go to a show.

## The Audiences

Tickets are sold at the box office just as in any other coun-

try, but such is the public demand that trade unions and other organisations buy blocks of seats, which they then sell to their members. The result is that the audiences at the Bolshoi, for instance, represent a real cross-section of the Soviet people. Here you will find the workers, railwaymen and miners, Red Army soldiers, housewives, in addition to the students and intellectuals who constitute the bulk of similar audiences in Western countries.

Nor is there any sort of social snobbery about theatre audiences. Some people put on their smartest clothes to go to the opera; some people don't. You please yourself, and nobody will scorn you if you haven't got your best suit on. Not that the audiences are slovenly or contemptuous of good manners; they are simply more easy-going and tolerant. We saw, incidentally, no stuffed shirts and black ties at any of the shows we went to.

There is, of course, no colour bar in the Soviet Union, and the various nationalities in the republics have been effectively welded together into a common citizenship, enjoying equal rights and status. In the streets of Moscow and Kiev we walked shoulder to shoulder with men and women of every conceivable race and of varying shades of colour, not only citizens of the Soviet Union but also visitors from abroad. Half the audience at the Bolshoi every evening would be excluded from theatres in this country as Non-Europeans.

## PEOPLE'S STANDARDS ARE HIGH

**T**HE general cultural level of the Soviet people appeared to us to be high and evenly spread over the whole population. The working-class audience at the Bolshoi, for example, knew its ballet a great deal better than we did and was highly critical of the standard of performance.

There is a tremendous intellectual ferment in the Soviet

Union. With the mass of the people eager for knowledge and culture and at last possessed of the facilities to enjoy it, public support for scientific, educational and cultural projects and institutions is unlimited.

Let us take as another example of this the Lenin State Library in Moscow. This is the largest library in the Soviet Union, though

there are, of course, several other libraries in Moscow alone, and every town, every village, every collective farm and every factory has its own library.

The Lenin Library is a general lending library, and you can borrow from it fiction and non-fiction, poetry and prose, out of a total of 17 million books, magazines and pamphlets published in 160 languages, 85 of them the languages of the Soviet peoples themselves. We looked for the names of South African writers in the index, but found only those of Olive Schreiner and Peter Abrahams, though there may be others we did not think of on the spur of the moment. The library also houses 270,000 original manuscripts, and has all the microfilm facilities necessary for the study of precious or rare documents, which cannot be lent out.

There are 13 reading halls, with nearly 2,000 seats, in this library. We passed through these reading halls and found them all crowded, with even a queue of people waiting for the chance of taking an empty seat. An average of 6,000 people visit the library every day and 20,000 books are taken out every day. In addition, the staff has to deal with 125,000 written queries during the course of a year.

Membership of the library is free, and so great is the pressure from the public that a staff of 1,800 is required to handle them and a huge building expansion programme is under way. There is also a special children's section in the library, visited by close on 1,000 children every day.

## Art Gallery

As another example of popular interest in the arts let us take the Tretyakow Gallery of Russian Art, which we visited one Sunday. This gallery contains 50 halls devoted to the various periods and painters in the history of Russian art. (There are, of course, other galleries in Moscow devoted to non-Russian art.) The gallery on

the day we went was absolutely crammed to the doors.

That day the sun was shining brightly outside and it was not very cold, so there is no question of the people merely having gone to the gallery to escape from the weather. The guide who took us round the various halls had to clear a way for us through the throng and ask people to step aside from the pictures so that we could view them. We have visited art galleries in other countries, for instance the Tate and National Galleries in London, and in these galleries, unless there is a special exhibition on, there are not very many people to be seen. Certainly we have never before seen such a mass of people in an art gallery—again the ordinary working people of Moscow—soldiers, children, etc.—and not merely the intellectuals and the specialists.

Ten thousand people visit the gallery of a Sunday and about 7,000 to 8,000 on weekdays. Such is the new mass audience which has been developed in the Soviet Union.

## Living Standards

The living standards of the Soviet people are rising steadily. Since the war there have already been four progressive cuts in the prices of commodities, particularly basic foods and clothing, and the cost of living has been reduced by more than 50 per cent. in the course of the last few years.

Above all, the volume of consumer goods available in the State shops is to-day greater than it has ever been. During the '20s and the '30s the main emphasis in the Soviet economy was placed on capital investment, laying the foundations for the industrial development of the country, accompanied by collectivisation in the countryside. During this period consumer goods were not always in free supply, though the people were always assured of their basic necessities. There followed the war period, in which the Soviet people suffered very greatly.

Now, however, all the sacrifices of the earlier decades are beginning to bear abundant fruit, and industry is turning out greater and greater quantities of every type of consumer goods, from cameras and fountain pens and watches and radio and television sets to food and drink. The average Soviet citizen is to-day living in greater comfort than he has ever lived before and, what is more, he knows that things are getting better all the time.

## Shops

We went into several shops in Moscow and Kiev. They are generally crammed with goods—and even more crammed with people. In fact, our observation led us to conclude that there just aren't enough shops in Moscow. It's not that there is a shortage of goods, though this may be true in such lines as radios and television sets. On the whole, the goods are available, but there are more people than counters to serve them at. We were informed that the authorities had laid it down as one of their most urgent tasks to increase the number of shops, particularly food shops, in Moscow. In furtherance of this decision, a huge new department

store had been opened on the Red Square shortly before we arrived in Moscow, and we spent some time wandering through this store and inspecting the range of goods.

The Soviet people show every sign of being well fed, and there is plenty of food available in the shops. The products of Soviet light industry are also good on the whole, though one does hear complaints from time to time, voiced in the Press and at public meetings, about the quality of certain lines, or the goods coming from a certain factory. While we were in Moscow, for example, there was published in the Press the case of a factory manager in one of the Soviet republics who had been brought before the court and sentenced for producing bad macaroni. It was maintained by the court that he had deliberately neglected his job and wasted State resources, with the result that the people had refused to buy his macaroni.

It is the constant task of the Soviet authorities, however, to ensure that the standard of production is of the highest. We now possess a Soviet camera, which is as good as anything of its kind produced in the West.

## DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

Election day, March 14, was a holiday in the Soviet Union. We woke up in Moscow that morning to the strains of gay music which was being relayed from loudspeakers in the streets and public buildings. It was a fine spring morning and all the trackless trams and buses were dressed with bags, and many of the buildings were decorated, lending an atmosphere of light-hearted gaiety to the scene.

The streets were crowded with people going to and from the polling stations. Every district, even the university, had its polling station, so that citizens were put to as little inconvenience as possible in registering their votes.

There had been intense pre-election activity and, as the results showed, there were few citizens who did not go to the polls that day.

The most important part of the election campaign in the Soviet Union is carried on before the day of election, when the candidates for each district are chosen by the election committees. Trade unions, party groups and other organisations submit to the election committee the name of the candidate they favour. On the election committee sit representatives of the various workers' organisations in that particular district, and it is their task to sift through the nominations and



choose the candidate whose nomination has been supported by the largest number of voters. There is plenty of canvassing and argument about the respective merits of candidates, and there is no doubt that the name nally chosen is the one which commands the widest support among the people.

When the voter comes to the polls he is handed a ballot form, on which appears the name only of the one candidate who has been chosen by the election committee. We were allowed into the polling station in the district in which our hotel was situated, and saw for ourselves exactly what happens at this stage. If the voter approves the choice he simply drops his ballot form into the ballot box. If he wishes to signify his disapproval he may scratch out the name and even insert the name of another candidate whom he would prefer to see elected. We were assured that such votes would be counted and would not be invalid.

**There is also no doubt that the ballot is secret. Closed booths are provided, and many of the voters made use of them. The only check which can be kept on the individual voter is as to whether or not he came to vote. The way in which he votes is his own private affair, and no official is in a position to find out what he did with his ballot form.**

On this occasion there was a 99.98 per cent. poll, and practically the whole electorate endorsed the final list of candidates. But we were satisfied from what we saw that had there been widespread disaffection or opposition to the regime it could have been ventilated through the ballot box. Not all the successful candidates were Communists, incidentally. Among those elected were a sizeable number of non-Communists.

The bulk of the voters in Moscow had already voted by mid-day, but the polling stations remained open till midnight. During the day and until late that night the citizens made merry. Extra cinema shows were laid on, the young people went to dances, and the hotels and restaurants were

full of people who had come into town from the surrounding districts to spend their holiday.

## Religious Freedom

We were also assured that there is complete religious freedom in the Soviet Union—and that by none other than some of the British businessmen in our hotel, who had risen early one Sunday morning and visited a church before breakfast! They reported that the service was attended by a large number of people, though mostly of the older generation.

The people are free to practise their religion, but the Church is no longer established as it was before 1917, and the congregations themselves must bear the financial burden of keeping their churches open. If new church buildings are required these may be provided by the Soviet Government, which has, in fact, restored many of the churches which were destroyed during the war.

At Zagorsk, the old monastery town near Moscow, the seminary of the Russian Orthodox Church still undertakes the training of student priests.

## The Mausoleum

Looking out of our hotel window after we arrived in Moscow, we saw a long queue stretching across the Red Square and round the corner along the walls of the Kremlin. It must have been fully half a mile long, and consisted of men, women and children moving slowly forward two abreast. A few days later we ourselves were to join this queue.

It consists of people who have come to visit the Mausoleum on the Red Square, in which lie the embalmed bodies of Lenin and Stalin. The queue has been in existence ever since the death of Lenin. After the death of Stalin last year the crowds wishing to visit the Mausoleum became so unmanageable that the authorities were forced to control admission by the issue of tickets.



The Moscow Metro, although not yet as large as the London Underground, is incomparably more beautiful. The first line of the Moscow underground was opened in 1935. There are now three lines with 40 stations, but there will eventually be 140 stations when the plan is completed. The two latest stations, completing an inner circle line, were officially opened on election day, March 14, 1954. Each station is devoted to a central theme, such as "Women," or "The Red Army," or "Labour" or "Agriculture," and is adorned with statuary, mosaic work, paintings and designs to illustrate that theme. The result is—as the architects intended—that it is a pleasure merely to walk through each station, and, in fact, many Moscow citizens can be seen merely sitting on the benches provided and taking their ease in pleasant surroundings. The utilitarian purpose of an underground railway has not, of course, been forgotten. At peak periods trains run every 40 seconds and are jammed to the doors. At "quiet" periods the trains run every two minutes and are also jammed to the doors.

Anyone wishing to visit the Mausoleum to-day must apply to his trade union or one or other of the workers' organisations, which have a certain number of tickets available for each day the Mausoleum is open. Preference is given to people, both Soviet citizens and foreigners, who come to Moscow from other areas, and we met some Muscovites who had applied for tickets and had still not received them several months later.

The Mausoleum is a building of very simple, even austere, design. In the central inner chamber the queue moves slowly past the

illuminated glass cases in which Lenin and Stalin lie. The bodies are very life-like, both lying in attitudes of repose as if the two leaders were merely asleep. Lenin looks exactly like all the portraits and busts which have made his visage familiar to the world—the high forehead, the determined chin; only the bright eyes are closed. Stalin, who has been a giant figure on the international scene in the life-time of all of us, now rests side by side with his old leader.

As the queue moves out of the Mausoleum it passes down the wall of the Kremlin, where lie

buried other Soviet leaders and many international figures, like McMahon and John Reed, who played their part in the events of 1917.

We remarked to ourselves afterwards that people can't be forced to stand in a queue. This never-ending procession of people who have come to pay their respects to their departed leaders is something which has to be seen to be believed.

## Peace and Friendship

It will by now have become apparent to all who have read our account of our visit to the Soviet Union that we were deeply impressed by what we saw. We make no apology for this. Any fair-minded visitor must be impressed by the energy and enthusiasm with which the Soviet people are building up their society, by their friendliness and hospitality, by their repeatedly-expressed desire to be left in peace to continue with their tasks.

While we were travelling to and from Europe both Sonia and I read the new complete version of the autobiography of Maxim Gorky, which was recently published in Britain. It is an astonishing story of the poverty, ignorance and brutishness of the life of the Russian people under the

Tsar. At one stage Gorky remarks:

"Often, recording such atrocious memories of our bestial Russian life, I wonder whether there is any point in recalling them. And, with revived assurance, I tell myself: 'The point is that this continues to be the actual, loathsome fact to this very day, that this fact must be traced back to its source and uprooted from our memories, from the souls of our people, from our confined and squalid lives.'

"And there is another point in recording these brutalities. Repellent though they are, and though many beautiful souls are burdened and crushed to death by them, yet the Russian remains spiritually so young and sound that he can, and does, transcend them. In this extraordinary Russian life not only does our animal self thrive and fatten, but along with it, and triumphant despite it, grows a brilliant, creative, wholesome human type which encourages us to seek our regeneration, a future of peace and humane living for all."

This section of Gorky's autobiography was written about 1914. It is in the light of what he says that one must really look at the Soviet Union to-day. Out of the past which he describes has come the present.

## Misrepresentations

There has, in our opinion, been terrific misrepresentation in the Western Press about the Soviet Union, and daily we are incited by our newspapers to despise and condemn the Soviet people, to suspect their motives, to fear them and even hate them. In this atmosphere the explosive tensions which lead to war are easily generated, and it is well known that there are circles in the West interested in launching atomic war against the Soviet Union at the first suitable opportunity.

**We saw no signs of war-like preparations in the Soviet Union. We found no mood of cold-war**

**hysteria or hostility towards the people of other countries. On the contrary, over and over again the people whom we met stressed their desire to live in peace and friendship with all.**

If our visit to the Soviet Union and this, our account of it, shall have done anything to improve understanding and relations between the Soviet and South African peoples we shall be pleased and happy to have made our small contribution to the lessening of international tension and the strengthening of peace throughout the world.

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**TREASON TRIAL, 1956 1961**

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